James Reston: Watergate without end

Nixon himself prolongs

Washington — President Nixon seems to have two things in mind these days: to restore confidence in himself, and, for this purpose, to get Watergate behind him as fast as possible.

But the man is a puzzle, for almost everything he does not only raises more doubts but prolongs the Watergate controversy in the Senate and in the courts.

Why, for example, does he appeal to the nation one day to leave Watergate to the courts, and then a few days later, announce that he "will not comply" with the orders of the court?

Why does he ask us to turn away from the contention of Watergate to "the urgent business of the nation," and then denounce the Ervin committee, and defy the courts?

A real puzzle

There is something very odd about all this, for it perpetuates precisely the doubts the President presumably is trying to put to rest, and dramatizes precisely those questions about his instinct and judgment, which are more troubling than anything else in the whole Watergate tragedy.

Throughout his career, Mr. Nixon had proclaimed himself to be a pragmatist. He has never allowed himself to get trapped by his past statements or ideology, and this flexibility has often served him well — notably in his reconciliation with the Soviets and the Chinese, whom he vilified for a generation.

But in the Watergate affair, he has been shifting ground almost too fast, invoking great principles one day and defying them the next. And the result is that he is giving pragmatism a bad name, and by his contradictions, raising questions about where he stands on the great questions of the day.

Mr. Nixon's problem is that he tends to balance the books every day, to say the expedient thing of the moment, without any coherent philosophy between one controversy and the next.

These tactical shifts may work in winning elections or even in dealing with the Russians or the Chinese, but they are less effective on things like the Watergate. Mr. Nixon's problem is that he tends to balance the books every day, to say the expedient thing for the moment, without any connecting rods or any coherent philosophy between one controversy and the next.

If he is speaking before the United Nations, he is a Wilsonian, defending collective security, and not only the League of Nations but a league of minds. If he has a crisis in the Middle East a few weeks later, he is as nationalistic as de Gaulle, forgetting all about what he said at the United Nations.

And while this often works in the savage jungle of world politics, it is not so effective in America, which is still more puritanical and less cynical than many people believe.

"The time has come," Mr. Nixon said on Aug. 15, "to turn Watergate over to the courts, where the questions of guilt and innocence belong. The time has come for the rest of us to get on with the urgent business of the nation."

Maybe most people in this country would agree with the President on this, but when the courts take over and ask him to compromise on the Watergate tapes, and he says he "will not comply with this order," obviously he has a problem.

He can appeal to the American people to believe in their political system, and hard as it is these days, they will try to believe him, but he cannot switch a few days later without losing the confidence he is trying to restore.

controversy

The Evening Bulletin
Opinion & Review
Friday, August 31, 1973
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"Some people," Mr. Nixon said on April 30, "quite properly appalled by the abuses that occurred, will say that Watergate demonstrates the bankruptcy of the American political system. I believe," he added, "precisely the opposite is true.

"Watergate represents a series of illegal acts and bad judgments by a number of individuals. It was the system that brought the facts to light and that will bring those guilty to justice — a system that in this case has included a determined grand jury, honest prosecutors, a courageous judge, John Sirica, and a vigorous free press."

But now the President is defying that "courageous judge, John Sirica," resenting those "honest prosecutors," including Archibald Cox, and even his own independent attorney general, Elliot Richardson, and villifying what he called the "vigorous free press."

The public's reaction

The result is not mainly that we now have a legal tangle over where the Sirica judgment will go from here — whether the President will go on defying the courts or provoke them into holding him in contempt, which they obviously don't want to do — but what the American people will think about all this legal tangle.

The guess here is that most people are more concerned with the moralities of the question than with the legalities, that they probably want things now to be left to the courts, but that they want the courts to have the evidence on who is lying and who is telling the truth.

But this is precisely what the President is saying he will not do — not even let the judge decide in private what is criminal evidence on those tapes and what is "national security."

(N. Y. Times News Service)